

James Woolley & Company

James Woolley established a major firm of pharmaceutical and photographic chemical manufacturers in Manchester, which lasted for over 150 years. The Museum's collections include examples of the company's pharmaceuticals.

Woolley was born in Dukinfield and served an apprenticeship to Samuel Dean, a chemist with premises on Piccadilly, Manchester. He took a course of lectures in medicine and, in 1832, studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh. However, he did not qualify as he could not stand watching operations, at that time carried out without anaesthetic.

Woolley returned to Manchester and opened a shop on King Street in 1833 as a chemist and druggist. Three years later, he married Ann Johns and moved to live in Gartside Street, where his son George Stephen was born. Woolley was active in local associations of chemists and druggists and, in 1841, was one of the first members of the new Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, later serving on the council. He was also associated with the Victoria Gallery for the Encouragement of Practical Science and read a paper at its first conversation in 1842.

In 1844, Woolley bought the Market Street business of R. H. Hargreaves. He was involved with the establishment of the Manchester Chemists' Conversational Society in 1852, to encourage education of pharmaceutical students. Woolley died in 1858, after having three operations which may have been the first use of chloroform in Manchester. Alongside his pharmaceutical activities, he was a member of the Town Council for six years. He was also a member of the Manchester Literary & Philosophical Society, later serving on its Council. He left eight children.

James' son George Stephen took over the business. He had served an apprenticeship in the family business and studied at Owens College in Manchester under Professor Henry Roscoe. He later attended classes run by the Manchester Pharmaceutical Association and then studied at the School of Pharmacy in London. Under George's management, the company began manufacturing chemicals, his younger brother Herman having control of this side of the business. Herman had studied in Germany, then at Owens College and finally at the London School of Pharmacy.

The company also made chemicals for the photographic trade as a sideline to its pharmaceutical work. In 1872, another brother, Harold, took over control of the scientific apparatus and surgical instrument departments. Harold had a similar education to his brother George. At the same time as Harold entered the business, a partnership was given to C. A. Johnstone and the firm became James Woolley, Sons & Company. Fire destroyed the premises behind the Market Street shop and the company moved to new premises in Knowsley Street, Cheetham Hill. Business increased and the company built an additional laboratory and installed new machinery seven years later. In 1889, Harold died after inhaling fumes of nitric acid in an accident. George Stephen's son, Edward James, took over his place as partner.

Woolley's began to take an interest in photographic equipment when the company saw the industry expanding so fast. In 1889, they produced the Victoria mahogany and brass hand-stand camera, using a Thornton-Pickard shutter and offering a choice of lens. By 1892, they were also producing the Medical microscope.

In 1892, the company moved to large, purpose-built premises at Victoria Bridge, which accommodated warehouses, showrooms, offices and dispatching facilities for the wholesale business. The firm still used the Market Street shop for retail business but later used a shop at 76, Deansgate. The Knowsley Street premises were used for laboratories and drug mills. In 1895, the company became limited, at which time it was one of the largest firms of wholesale and export chemists and druggists in the country, employing about 200 people. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Woolley's produced several metal folding cameras but ceased production in 1914 as they used German lenses and shutters. George Stephen Woolley died in 1918 after 60 years service to the business. He was a member of the Literary & Philosophical Society and served President to the Manchester Chemists and Druggists Association. He took a prominent part in establishing a course of classes in co-operation with Owens College. He was also an examiner of the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain in 1867-8 and served as a member of the Council twice, supporting the admission of women to the Society.



After the First World War, Woolley's never regained a place in the camera market but carried on making photographic studio requisites and chemicals as an adjunct to their pharmaceutical and scientific instrument business. Herman died in 1920 and Edward James Woolley became Chairman, his wife taking over on his death in 1927. During her chairmanship, the company paid for new pharmaceutical laboratories in the Medical Department of the University of Manchester, at a cost of £3,000. The company acquired property in

Mary Street, near Victoria Bridge, for housing and maintaining its large fleet of vehicles and to accommodate printing, joinery and basket-making, empties and bottle washing.

In 1936, the company took over J. C. Arnfield & Sons Ltd, of Stockport. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, and the increased demand for drugs and surgical appliances which accompanied it, placed a great strain on a workforce rapidly depleted by the national call-up. The company undertook Saturday afternoon and Sunday working in order to cope. Twice, enemy bombs hit the Mary Street premises and the Market Street shop was totally destroyed. In order to protect stocks, the company acquired additional premises at Rose Hill in Oldham, later using these for drug-grinding mills for powdered drugs. By the late 1940s, the firm supplied chemical and physical apparatus and laboratory equipment, as well as supplying hospital furniture, surgical instruments and X-ray equipment. The company was taken over in 1963.

For more information:

Read Channing, Norman & Mike Dunn. *British Camera Makers: an A-Z Guide to Companies and Products*. Esher, UK: Parkland Designs, 1996.
Woolleys of Manchester: a Record of 150 Years in Pharmacy. Manchester, UK: James Woolley, Sons & Co. Ltd, c. 1947.